



PHOTOGRAPHER PROFILE JOE P. SMITH

“Anticipation is key to capturing a moment”

Joe P. Smith studied art and design in Malta and Florence. He is a member of the Malta Photographic Society and a Fellow of the Malta Institute of Professional Photographers.

Smith won the Photographer of the Year award in 1995 and was made Associate of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain and Artist of the International Federation of Photographic Art. In 2002, Smith was awarded the prestigious Overseas Master Photographer award by the Master Photographers Association UK.

Smith has been the official photographer of the Malta Jazz Festival since its first edition in 1991. “I was already doing a good amount of theatre photography at the time and was ecstatic at the prospect of capturing on film some of the best exponents of my favourite music. The line-up of the first edition was fantastic and I couldn’t wait for the first night.”

“I find that the genre reflects what every artist should excel in: improvisation. One of my good friends is jazz pianist Paul Giordimaina and we spent most of our younger days listening to jazz.”

Smith’s photographic collection spans all the editions of the Malta Jazz Festival.

“As my collection grew, I made it a point not to miss any editions. When artists make a repeat appearance in Malta, I take down prints from my collection and get them autographed and framed. I also present a print to the performers. A few big names who have played at the Malta Jazz Festival have since passed away, so the posterity value is even greater. I have also made friends with a number of performers and have supplied them with photos for their CD or DVD booklets.”

For Smith, the first edition of the Malta Jazz Festival remains one of the best. “Elvin Jones,



Chick Corea, Michel Petrucciani - the mouth waters at the memory. I remember how during that first edition, Chick Corea was playing and I went backstage and up the steps to the stage to get a view from there. I could see a beautiful shot with Corea on the grand piano, his form outlined by a beautiful rim light that was coming from a spot placed near the sound engineers. I wanted that shot. At that moment Chick’s manager passed by and I asked him if I could go on stage and shoot towards the audience. He agreed, and so I went up on stage. As I was focusing I saw the Maltese stage-manager rushing towards me angrily. I made the shot and walked off the stage to be met by the furious gentleman. At that moment, Chick’s manager jumped in to my rescue, saying that I had his permission.”



“In those days I used to process all my black and white films and print the photographs. Nowadays, digital photography has made life much easier and the results are phenomenal. Of course, I’m happy I went through the darkroom stage as the discipline gave me a deep understanding of monochrome photography.”

When taking photos at the festival, “My main objective is not just getting a good picture of the performers, but also to capture their individuality in their improvisations: the very essence of jazz. I look for the interaction of the musicians with their instruments and with the audience, their expressions, their effort, their concentration even when they’re not playing.”

“In my jazz photography I try to convey the pressure, tension and emotion of improvisation. My preference for monochrome images is in tune with what jazz is all about: compression of tones and economy of interpretation. I am also after facial expressions, mood and body language. I often wander backstage in search of a different viewpoint or to capture a musician warming up or in a totally relaxed mood. For me, these are not actors on stage but fellow artists whose bravura reveals without constraints the pain of love.”

“Anticipation is key to capturing a moment. The more you shoot, the more you learn to anticipate. If you also have a certain knowledge of a number being played, this can help in choosing the decisive moment. Sometimes I follow-focus a musician for a few seconds until I see an expression that I like, and then I shoot.”

“Composition is also important. In my work, you can see vast amounts of black that offsets the main action. I feel this increases the power and emotion of the act that is unfolding.”

